

Navigating Cultural Inclusivity, Scientific Synergy and Ancient Insights: A Critical (Re)Appraisal of the Jagannath Cult and Chariot Festival

Nishamani Kar*

Abstract

The Jagannath cult and the Rath Yatra festival have significant cultural, philosophical, and ecological value. The Jagannath of Puri signifies universal spiritual inclusivity, blending elements from various religious traditions. Puri serves as a hub for diverse devotees, emphasizing love, compassion, and community service. The annual Rath Yatra procession, featuring the journey of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra, demonstrates democratic principles and equality. The festival bridges caste, creed, and religious divides, fostering unity and in “*Naba Kalebara*” ritual denotes life cycles and reverence for nature, reflecting ecological ethics and sustainable practices. The festival’s themes resonate with inclusivity, unity, and shared humanity, reinforcing its relevance in contemporary discussions on democracy and development.

Keywords: Cultural Inclusivity, Scientific Synergy, Ancient Insights, Rath Yatra, Jagannath Cult, Chariot Festival

Shri Jagannath (Lord of the Universe), the presiding deity of Puri, plays a pivotal role in the political, social, and cultural life of Hindus. A deity worshipped by the autochthonous *Sabaras* (representing the ‘Little Tradition’) has gradually evolved into the *Purushottama*¹ and occupied the highest position in the ‘Great Tradition’ of the Hindu Pantheon. Inevitably, the Jagannath Cult - a synthesis of diverse religious customs and practices, encompassing Brahmanism, Jainism, Buddhism, Shaivism, Shaktism,

Saurism, Vaishnavism, Nathapanth, Ganapatya, Nirguna, and Saguna - has been deeply embedded in millions of hearts in India and around the world. In the process, it has absorbed all the major religious movements and philosophies that have swept the Indian subcontinent and advanced into an unparalleled syncretism.

Followers of the cult often believe that the worship of Jagannath transcends sectarian divides and represents universal values of love, compassion, and community service. Therefore, the spiritual hub, Puri, witnesses a remarkable phenomenon where devotees, even from non-Vaishnav and non-Hindu backgrounds, experience profound devotion, transcending their cultural and religious affiliations. The presence of numerous *maths* and memorials from various sects highlights this deep-rooted interest and commitment to spiritual practices. For instance, Sri Nanak Dev, a key figure in Sikhism, is said to have prayed at the feet of Lord Jagannath, establishing Mangu Math during his influential stay. Similarly, Shankar Dev, an Assamese Sant with a strong belief in Nirguna Brahman, expressed his devotion to Lord Jagannath, who embodies Saguna Brahman. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, often revered as an incarnation of Sri Radha, identified Krishna within the deity and advocated the transformative power of chanting His name as a pathway to devotion. Poet-saint Kabir saw the divine as a unified presence, finding no distinction between Allah and Jagannath, with his legacy commemorated at Kabir Ghat along the Puri coastline. Tulsi Das, a prominent devotee, meditated at ‘*Tulsi Chaura*’, wherein he envisioned Lord Ram in the figure of Jagannath. Even Ganapati Bhatt, a devotee of Ganesha, perceived Sri Jagannath as a manifestation of his deity. Some scholars put forth the view that Lord Jagannath and Buddha were the same God. The great Vaishnavite poet Jayadeva accepts Buddha as one *Avatar* of Vishnu in verse 13 of ‘*Dasavatara sloka*’, given as under:

* Professor Bhima Bhoi Chair, Utkal University of Culture, Bhubaneswar 752054. Can be reached at nk_shruti2005@rediffmail.com

*Nindāsi Jagnyabidha Rahāha Śruti Jātana
Sadaya Hrdaya Darśita Paśughātam.
Keśabha Dhṛta Buddha Śarīra
Jaya Jagadīśa Hare.*

(Jayadeva: *Gīta Govinda*, Verse 13 p. 25.)

[O Jagadīśvara! O Hari! O Keśi-nisudana! You have assumed the form of Buddha. Being compassionate and sensitive, you decry the Vedas when you see the violence inflicted upon animals in the course of sacrificial performances. May you be victorious!]

Furthermore, the dynamic nature of Lord Jagannath's identity is celebrated through His various costumes on specific occasions, portraying different *avatars* (incarnations) that signify the interconnectedness of all divine forms, encapsulating the profound message that "He is in all" and "All are in Him." We are reminded here of the popular Odia verse:

*Tume sankalpa tume bikalpa
Tume anaādi asima
Tume ashesha tume asankshya
Tume ārambha antima I*

...
*Keun nāma dhari dākibu tumaku?
Tume je sarvanāma. II*

(Panigrahi, 1976)

[You are the resolve, you are the option,
Without a beginning, endless in creation.
The infinite vastness, the immeasurable span,
The onset and the ultimate essence of man.

...
In which name shall I call you, O' the Supreme Sublime?
You are in all and all in You, beyond all time.]

(Tr. Author)

This rich tapestry of experiences illustrates Puri's unique capacity to cultivate devotion across diverse spiritual traditions, reinforcing the universality of faith. Central to the nuances of this cultural mosaic is the *Rath Yātrā*² (Car Festival), an annual event involving the deities (Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra - siblings are they, all) setting out on a *yatra* (journey) on *Āsāḍha Shukla Dwitīyā* (the second day of the bright fortnight of *Sharad Paksha* in the Hindu lunar calendar, typically corresponding to June or July in the Gregorian calendar) to a temporary sojourn at their aunty's dwelling (*Māusi Mā Mandir/ Gundicha Mandir*) about 3 km away from *Sri Mandir*, their permanent abode. Eventually, the deities come out of the temple to *Bada Danda* (Grand Avenue - the pathway for the *Rath Yatra*) for public viewing, allowing devotees to have their *Darshan* (Divine Glimpse). The rhythmic chanting of hymns, the fervent enthusiasm of

devotees pulling the chariots, and the sheer magnitude of the event make it an unforgettable experience. This event symbolically represents the journey of the divine to the living realm, a typical case of 'involution' (Sri Aurobindo's phrase). It serves as an essential lens through which we can explore themes of cultural inclusivity, scientific innovation, and the lasting significance of ancient wisdom in today's world. This paper critically assesses the importance of the *Rath Yātrā* across multiple spheres, highlighting both its historical significance and its contemporary relevance.

The four primary functions that are observed during the *Yatra* are *Pahandi Vije* of three Lords Jagannath, Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra, *Cherāpaharā* by *Gajapati* (the king of Puri) and ultimately, the *Ghosa Yātrā* and *Bahudā Yātrā* of three Lords. In *Pahandi Vije*, the deities are brought by the *Daitā Sevakas* (Servitors), who take them to the three Chariots made for the three deities. Then, *Chera Pahara* (the sweeping of the chariot) involves the sweeping or cleaning of the chariots by the *Gajapati* King of Puri, who takes on the humble role of a servant and sweeps the chariot with a golden broom as a sign of devotion and humility. This act symbolises equality and the idea that all devotees, regardless of their social status, must serve the divine. It preaches democratic principles and universal brotherhood, i.e. equality among the unequals. The positive philosophy of the Jagannath cult thus teaches that from the *Raja*, the supreme authority of the state, to the *Praja*, the commoner, all are the same. There should neither be any discrimination nor any differentiation between the two, for which the cult of Lord Shri Jagannath is said to be the rarest of the rare cults, perhaps the most progressive in the world, social or familial, religious or political, a tradition which usually originates from an objective and gets refined with the dedication in observing it. Both the objective and the dedication are indispensable in keeping a tradition alive with all its glory and effects. Over the years, *Rathayatra* has been kept alive to fulfil the resolve of endorsing humility in spirituality and invoking a longing for spiritual elevation through *sarana* (surrender), especially in the light of the assertion in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

*Sarvadharmān parityajya māmekam śaraṇam vraja |
Ahaṁ tvām sarvāpādebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucah ||*

(*Bhagavad Gita*:18/66) (Bhaktivedanta, A.C. 1986, 749.)

[Abandon all varieties of religion and surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear.]

After observance of all rituals and worship to the Lords, thousands of devotees pull the three Chariots on the *Badadānda* (Grand Road) of Puri up to *Sri Gundīchā* temple (The Aunt House of Lords). On the way, they are fed *Po*.

dapithā (specially baked rice cakes). In *Sri Gundīchā Temple*, the deities give *darshan* to countless devotees everyday with ten different *Beshas* (adornments) continuously for eight days. Then, the deities return to *Sri Mandir* (The Main Temple), riding their Chariots, popularly known as *Bahudā Yātrā*. The *sevakas* (servitors) who are allotted to provide different services to Lords during the *Yātrā* are called *Ḍāhuka*, *Chitrakaras*, *Khuntjā*, *Doliā*, *Pahandīā*, etc. Inevitably, 'Utkala Khanda' in *Skanda Purana* describes Purusottama Kshetra and presents information regarding its age, sanctity and significance while presenting a recipe for an ideal observation of *Rath Yātrā*, which includes an account of the rituals and practices that must be paid attention to both before and during the festival.

Barring aside the procedures, the *Rath Yātrā* has a profound commitment to cultural inclusivity. The festival is characterised by its welcoming nature, transcending traditional barriers of caste, colour, creed, and nationality. This inclusive ethos is not merely a contemporary interpretation but is steeped in the teachings of Lord Jagannath, whose essence embodies universal acceptance and love. This reminds us of Bhakta Salabega (a pivotal figure in the holy landscape of the seventeenth century from the Muslim community), who sings about the Lord in fervent devotion.

You exist for the devotees, as they, for You, do yearn,
Conch and discus, Your sacred symbols, in gentle grace, they turn.

Faithful are they, Your kin, their spirits ever true,
You shower boundless blessings upon them, O Krupasindhu!

As a calf seeks its mother, craving milk and the sweet embrace,

So do You walk beside them, uplifting all with tranquil grace.
Born of a Mughal father and a widowed Brahmin,
In a world divided starkly, receiving water from me is forbidden.

Yet Salabega stands humble, with a heart that softly pleads,
For beyond all earthly boundaries, Your Coloured Feet he finds.

A beacon bright and shining, transcending every need,
In Your embrace, O Divine One, his spirit finds its creed.

(Salabega, *Eka To Bhakata Jibana* -
In Devotion's Embrace, 23.)(Tr. Author)

Salabega stands as a monumental figure in the history of Odia literature and spiritual practice. His life story reflects the complexities of identity during a time of significant cultural shifts, while his *Bhajans* (Hymns) capture the profound yearning for connection with the divine. Through the melodies and messages of devotion he left behind, Salabega has become an iconic representative of the *Bhakti Movement*—the embodiment

of a genuine, heartfelt relationship with God that transcends the barriers of caste and creed. Legend has it that while returning from Vrindavan, Salabega, delayed by unforeseen circumstances, prayed the Lord earnestly to wait for him on the *Nandighosha* Chariot. His prayer was answered as Lord Jagannath awaited his arrival, allowing Salabega the *darshan* - a glimpse of his beloved deity. This moment serves as a testimony to the profound bond between Bhakta Salabega and Lord Jagannatha, and it is commemorated even today at the site where he is believed to have been buried—a minor memorial honours their relationship, and during the chariot festival, the procession pauses there in tribute. His legacy, marked by the spirit of inclusion, passionate devotion, and artistic excellence, continues to inspire generations. Eventually, Bhakta Salabega is not merely a voice from the past but a vibrant thread in the ongoing exercise of spiritual exploration and artistic expression, symbolising the power of devotion to bridge divides and elevate the human spirit.

Thus, the festival essentially acts as an annual reminder of the importance of unity in diversity, fostering interfaith dialogues that allow participants to engage with various cultural expressions strewn with religious commitment. Adi Shankaracharya, the proponent of Advaita Vedanta, established *Purvamnaya Sri Govardhana Pitham* or *Govardhan Math* in Puri - one of the four original *maths* (monasteries) - the other three being *Sringeri Śārada Pīṭham* (Karnataka), *Dvāraka Sharada Pīṭham* (Gujarat), *Uttarāmnāya Śrī Jyotish Pīṭham* or *JyotirMath* (Uttarakhand) and composed the highly popular devotional Sanskrit poem known as *Sri Jagannathāṣṭakam* which states thus:

*rathārūḍho gacchan pathi milita bhūdeva paṭalaih
stuti prādurbhāvam pratipadamupākarnya sadayaḥ. AAAA
dayā sindhurbandhuḥ sakala jagatām sindhu sutayā
jagannāthaḥ svāmī nayana patha gāmī bhavatu me ..*

(Sri Sankracharya, 2020, 115)

[When Lord Jagannatha is on his Ratha-yatra cart and moving along the road, at every step, prayers and songs are chanted by large assemblies of Brahmanas. Hearing their hymns, Lord Jagannatha is very favourably disposed towards them. He is the ocean of mercy and the true friend of all the worlds. May that Lord, along with his consort Lakshmi, who was born from the sea of nectar, be the object of my vision.]

Further,

*Dole tu Dolagovindam Chāpe tu Madhusūdhanam |
Rathe tu Vāmanam dṛṣṭvā Punarjanmam na vidyate | |*

(Jagannath Suktam)³

[When one sees Lord Krishna in His form as Govinda while He is swinging, and sees Lord Madhusudana while He has

the Boat journey, and sees Lord Vamana in His dwarf form in the Rath or Chariot, one does not attain rebirth.]

This shloka conveys the idea that recognising and meditating upon these divine forms of the Lord leads to *moksha* (salvation) or liberation from the cycle of birth and death (*samsāra*). Such is the glory and sanctity of *Purusottama Kshetra* or Puri, where Lord Jagannath (Vishnu) resides eternally and grants *moksha* to everybody who sees Him in *Vāmana* form during *Rath Yatra*. Thus, the stated verse essentially relates to the divine nature of Lord Jagannath as seen during the *Rath Yātrā* and reflects themes of devotion and spiritual significance. Eventually, the idea of witnessing or experiencing the sacred presence of Lord Jagannath, often in his *Vāmana* (dwarf) avatar, highlights the worshipper's connection with the divine through sight and devotion. Witnessing this event is a powerful spiritual experience for many (seeing or experiencing the divine not just in a physical form but also through spiritual insight), which reflects a broader theme in Hinduism, where the act of seeing (*darshan*) is considered a sacred and transformative experience. As per the Vaishnavites, it is a reminder of the accessibility of divinity to the devotee and the communal aspect of worship.

As such, the *Rath Yātrā* stands not only as a religious observance but as a cultural melting pot, inviting individuals from disparate backgrounds to participate in a shared experience that celebrates both individuality and collective bonhomie, thriving on an age-old legacy. The social sciences, particularly Anthropology and Sociology, find fertile ground in studying the dynamics of societal evolution with its emphasis on family values based on togetherness. It is as if the profound impact of religious practices on community structures is ensured. From a different viewpoint, the collective experience of the milieu involved in the grand festival reinforces social bonds and collective identity, demonstrating how cultural events can shape societal cohesion and resilience amidst rapidly changing socio-political landscapes.

From a different perspective, the artistic collaboration involved in creating the chariots highlights not only the creativity of diverse communities united in *Seva* (Service) but also the collaborative effort of blending various professional expertise into a vibrant display. The construction of the three grand chariots for the Puri *Rath Yātrā* showcases remarkable engineering feats that reflect innovative design and an advanced understanding of technique and materials, serving as an inspiration for contemporary architectural practices. Each chariot features the presiding deity alongside side deities, with their worship being integral to the overall reverence shown to the principal deity, thus enriching devotional

practices within Hinduism. *Nandighosa*, the chariot of Jagannath, includes Vamana and eight other deities: Varaha, Gobardhan, Gopi Krishna, Narasimha, Rama, Narayan, Hanuman, and Rudra. *Taladhwaja*, the chariot of Balabhadra, has nine side deities: Ganesha, Kartikeya, Sarvamangala, Pralambari, Halayudha, Mrutyunjaya, Natamvara, Mukteswar, and Shesha Deva. Finally, *Darpadalana*, the chariot of Subhadra, features nine side deities: Chandi, Chamunda, Ugratara, Vanadurga, Shulidurga, Varahi, Shyamakali, Mangala, and Vimala.

At the same time, the chariots exhibit distinct differences in colour and structure, each infused with rich symbolic meanings that reflect various aspects of Hindu beliefs and cultural practices. The *Taladhwaja*, standing 44 feet tall and draped in green and red, is equipped with 14 wheels. The *Darpadalana*, the smallest one at approximately 43 feet, features a red and black design and has 12 wheels. Contrastingly, the *Nandighosa* chariot, representing the earthly form of the Lord, measures 45 feet in height, is adorned with red and yellow stripes and boasts 16 wheels. These elaborately designed chariots are often embellished with flowers, flags, and intricate motifs, symbolising the connection between the divine and earthly realms.

Furthermore, the *Rath Yatra* raises critical discussions about sustainability, given its emphasis on locally sourced materials and eco-friendly rituals. This commitment to environmental harmony reverberates with current global sustainability agendas, highlighting the relevance of ancient traditions in addressing modern ecological challenges. In this context, we must admit that the idols, otherwise referred to as 'Darubrahma', are usually replaced approximately every 12 to 19 years, depending on astrological calculations, in alignment with specific lunar cycles. New idols are carved out of specific logs of wood, and the *Brahma* is transferred from the old to the new ones in an extended ceremony called '*Naba Kalebara*', signifying the concept of renewal, the cycle of life, death and rebirth. Subtly, the Lord is addressed as 'Daru Debata', and the process underscores the reverence for trees and natural materials when creating objects of worship. This ensures a deep respect for nature and its preservation. The *Naba Kalebara* ritual not only highlights the veneration of nature, particularly trees but also embodies a broader spiritual principle that recognises the divine presence in all aspects of life. By incorporating natural elements into religious practices, it fosters a sense of responsibility to nurture and protect the environment, celebrating the intricate relationship between spirituality and the natural world. This love for trees and nature is an essential component of the cultural identity of the Puri

region and contributes to the ecological ethics rooted in the community's spiritual anchorage.

The Jagannath cult, inevitably, offers deep philosophical insights that extend beyond religious observance. Themes of transcendence and community permeate the rituals and lore associated with the cult, providing rich material for existential reflection in contemporary discussions. Understanding the historical trajectory of the Jagannath cult elucidates the socio-political context of the region, particularly against the backdrop of Muslim, Mughal, Afghan, and Maratha rule and British colonialism, leading to the resurgence of indigenous identities. Eventually, the practices in the temple, especially the rituals of the *Naba Kalebara* and *Rath Yātrā* are imbued with symbolism that resonates across various cultural and religious paradigms. Such symbolic representations encourage a dialogue that transcends regional boundaries, promoting global appreciation for the shared human experience captured in such sacraments.

A critical (re)appraisal of the Jagannath cult and *Rath Yātrā* reveals a complex drapery woven with strands of cultural, scientific, and historical significance. This multifaceted exploration highlights the potential for ancient practices to inform contemporary discussions surrounding inclusivity and sustainability. The *Rath Yātrā* not only celebrates a rich heritage but also serves as a vital platform for fostering understanding and respect among diverse and disparate cultural and social groups. We are reminded, here, of the Rigvedic dictum “*Ekam Satya, Vipra Bahuda Badanti*” [Truth is one; the wise call it by various names], which conveys the essence of unity in diversity, emphasising that while there may be many interpretations or expressions of the ultimate truth or reality, they all point to the same fundamental essence. It reflects a key philosophical concept in Hinduism and other spiritual traditions that advocate for an understanding of the oneness of all existence. It embodies the idea that different religions, cultures, and philosophies may articulate their knowledge of truth in various ways. Still, at the core, they share a common pursuit of understanding the ultimate reality. This perspective encourages respect and tolerance among different belief systems, promoting a harmonious coexistence. As we engage in dialogues informed by these insights, we cultivate a deeper appreciation of diversity and the myriad ways in which historical practices can guide modern thought and action in the context of democracy, détente and development. In conclusion, the *Rath Yātrā* stands as a powerful testament to the enduring legacy of cultural inclusivity and the potential for communal harmony in our fleeting, fragmented, and often superficial world. To encapsulate this sentiment, we will conclude this paper with a couple

of stanzas composed by the author as an invocation to the Supreme Lord.

You are the river, you are the stream,
You are the boatman guiding our dream.
You carry our hopes on currents so bright,
Steering us through the stillness of the night.

Dance in the river gets the summon from the sea,
Together, they writhe and weave through eternity.

With the waves that swirl and gleam,
You ride the tide, the core of our dream.

Notes

1. Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Neelachal Dham, Puri, does not belong to any particular sect. Often described as ‘Purusottama’, it is all-pervasive. While three other Dhams in different centres of India represent three different deities of the Hindu pantheon, viz Badrika-Vishnu, Dwarka-Krishna, Rameswar-Shiva, the fourth Dham, i.e. Nilachal Dham symbolises the holy place of one and all. He is cosmopolitan and embraces the spiritual thoughts of all sects, which signifies unity and diversity.
2. *Rath Yatra*, also known as the Chariot Festival, is a significant Hindu festival celebrated primarily in Puri, Odisha. It honours Lord Jagannath, who is a manifestation of Lord Krishna, along with his siblings, Balabhadra and Subhadra. Here are some key points about the Rath Yatra: chariot procession (the grand procession of the deities in massive chariots. The main chariot, known as *Nandighosh*, carries Lord Jagannath, while the other chariots, *Taladhvaaja* and *Darpadalana*, carry his siblings, Balabhadra and Subhadra, respectively); significance (the festival symbolises the annual journey of the deities from the Jagannath Temple to their Aunt's House known as Gundicha Ghar. The journey signifies the bond between the gods and their devotees); devotional participation (thousands of devotees participate in the festival, pulling the chariots with ropes while singing devotional songs. This involvement is considered an act of devotion, and it connects the devotees more closely to the divine); cultural Impact (Rath Yatra is not only a religious event but also a cultural extravaganza involving various traditional performances, dances, and feasts. It draws thousands of pilgrims and tourists from around the world); global celebrations (while the most famous Rath Yatra occurs in Puri, similar celebrations are held in various places across India and followers' communities worldwide, including the famous Rath Yatra organised by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in different cities globally). The festival promotes the message of equality, unity, and devotion, transcending all social barriers and allowing everyone an opportunity to come together to worship.
3. The “Jagannath Suktam” describes the various forms and glories of Lord Jagannath and is often recited in temples

and during festivals. This specific verse emphasises the blessings and the transformative experience of witnessing the deity.

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